

Democracy in Education is a presentation and critical examination of the efforts being made in the Swedish childcare and school sector to promote a common code of fundamental democratic values. The material is largely based on earlier reports from the National Agency for Education on this subject, focusing on evaluation, scrutiny, supervision and analysis and support. The book is intended as an aid to further discussion of the opportunities, problems, skills and requirements involved in the promotion of democratic values in education.

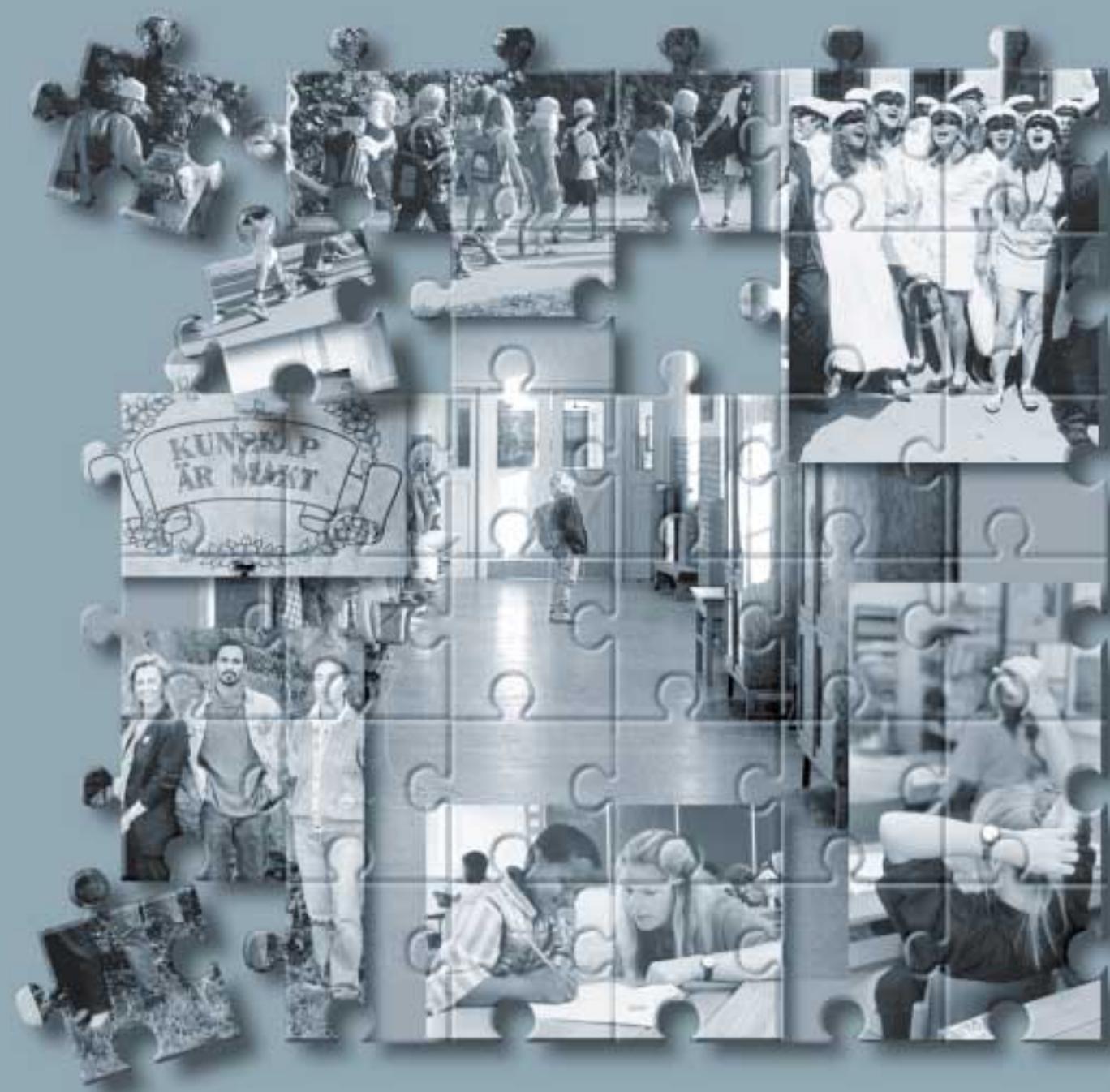
*Skolverket*

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DEMOCRACY IN SWEDISH EDUCATION

THEMATIC PRESENTATION OF BASIC VALUES

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National Agency for Education

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**CONTENT:**

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**SUBJECT HEADINGS:** Democracy, democratic values, norms, Swedish childcare, Swedish education, Swedish schools, values

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# Foreword

The aim of the National Agency for Education in publishing this book is to provide a comprehensive picture of the efforts that have been made by childcare centres and schools in recent years in the field of democratic values. The Agency hopes that the book will serve as a tool and an aid in further discussions on the opportunities and problems involved in the work with democratic values – for staff and management in childcare and schools as well as for political representatives and officials at both national and local level.

The basic material for this presentation has been drawn from *An In-Depth Study of Fundamental Democratic Values in Education*, commissioned from the National Agency for Education by the Swedish Government in 1999. This study is in turn based on previous Agency reports on democratic values in education, focusing on evaluation, scrutiny, supervision, analysis and support.

There are considerable differences in the means and opportunities childcare and schools have for working with democratic issues. Some have progressed far down the line and are displaying considerable awareness and long-term thinking in their work and are studying the subject in some depth. Others have progressed more slowly. There are differences to be found both within schools, between different schools and types of school, and both between and within other forms of educational activity.

When children and young people come to master the basics of democracy – values, patterns of thought, norms and actions – they do so in many different ways. They absorb information from the adults they live with both at home and at school. They test the limits of democracy to determine what such values imply, and the positive and negative effects of their actions teach them certain lessons. They observe the way people ground their actions in democratic principles, and act accordingly. They find such role models at home, among friends, via the media and at school. By living in situations and roles where the expectations of others and the responsibilities they are given augment their experience of life, they learn to embrace fundamental democratic values and to express them in the way they relate to others. The various

means that children and young people employ to make democratic values their own are greatly enhanced by dialogue with adults. Where adults initiate constructive dialogue, children and young people have a better chance of learning and absorbing fundamental democratic values.

The work of promoting democratic issues cannot be separated from other day-to-day school work. It is a continuous process that informs all aspects of school life throughout a pupil's education: in lessons, at breaks, when hurrying between classrooms, in spontaneous encounters with canteen staff or janitors, and in the teachers' staff-room. And the participants change – pupils develop, grow and progress to different levels, leave school and are replaced by others. Staff, too, enter new constellations, and educational activities change, as do the political constellations in municipal decision-making bodies.

Just as the links of a chain or the pieces of a puzzle belong together, the various elements that go to make up our democratic values must be kept together so that they become a powerful whole. We also need to understand the problems involved so as to identify the opportunities. Each piece of the puzzle is needed if we are to complete the picture. This report identifies the factors that appear to be the most crucial if childcare centres and schools are to work successfully with democratic values. And how we pursue the work depends to a great extent on how we perceive the childcare and school mandate in this respect – and also how the policy documents are used. If we are already divided in our views on these basic matters, we can be virtually certain that the results of our efforts will vary as well.

An important task for the National Agency for Education is to improve people's understanding of the opportunities, problems and prerequisites that exist in childcare and the school system, among governing bodies and at national level. The Agency will, therefore, be supporting and encouraging discussion and dialogue in a variety of ways in the future with a view to enhancing awareness and understanding of how thinking on the subject of democratic values and their application might be furthered. The present report is a contribution to this process.

Mats Ekholm  
*Director-General*

Fredrik Modigh  
*Project Manager*

# Summary

Issues involving democracy and basic values in society have increasingly come to the fore in Swedish public debate in recent years, not least in relation to views and behaviour that violate the democratic code, such as bullying, racism and sexual harassment. The Government and the relevant national authorities have introduced a number of different measures during this period aimed at supporting and encouraging local efforts on behalf of democracy. Public debate on education has also come to focus increasingly on the opportunities and difficulties that schools encounter when seeking to impart, establish and give shape to basic democratic values. Thus the narrow focus on the role of schools as providers of factual knowledge is beginning to broaden.

## Ways of viewing the democratic mandate

Sweden's childcare centres and schools have been entrusted with the task of developing democratic skills in children and young people. To this end, they are to undertake their activities in a democratic way, help children and young people develop into democratic members of society and equip them with an appreciation of the substance and forms of democracy. Childcare centres and schools have a unique democratic opportunity in this respect in that they are social meeting-places for girls and boys, for different cultures and for different social groups. There, children and young people are given the chance to develop into independent individuals who respect and show consideration for those who hold different views. Childcare centres and schools may be the only institutions where children and young people are able to come together whatever their background. This kind of diversity is an important prerequisite for fulfilling the educational system's democratic mandate.

Basic democratic values find expression wherever we may be – in both formal and informal learning environments, i.e. both inside and outside the classroom, during breaks, in corridor encounters and in school canteens. Bullying and other types of abusive behaviour tend to take place in the informal environments, which means democratic values cannot be viewed

simply as a subject to be taught. People must also observe and take responsibility for the ways in which relationships and encounters work in an educational institution's informal structures. If due consideration is not given to the kind of learning that takes place there, preschool centres and schools will miss both an important aspect of their work and an opportunity to promote their democratic mandate. Children and young people will otherwise be left with the impression that a school is made up of different social environments where people can behave in completely different ways – what is not allowed in the classroom may be eminently possible at breaks. Children and young people adjust their behaviour accordingly. When this happens, adults find it difficult to detect and take action to stop and to prevent abusive behaviour.

### Creating scope for dialogue, interaction and good social relations

The present report is concerned primarily with the ability of childcare and schools to create the conditions for dialogue, interaction and good social relations as a basic prerequisite for their work with democratic values. Dialogue allows differing views and values to confront one another and develop. Dialogue allows individuals to make their own ethical judgements by listening, reflecting, finding arguments and appraising, while it also constitutes an important instrument for developing an understanding of one's own views and those of others. Educational activities that seek to strengthen social relations – and that use discussion and dialogue in which all may take part – satisfy both the requirement for working in a democratic way and the requirement for developing the democratic skills of children and young people. Segregated environments can impede the development of both meeting-places and dialogue where contrasting views can be exchanged.

Children, young people, staff and management all express a strong desire to work with basic democratic values and a strong commitment to the idea, which means that one of the main prerequisites for success is present. Children and young people want to discuss values and norms, they want closer relationships with adults and more time for discussions with them about ethical questions and relationships. Staff and school leaders would also like more scope for work with democratic values, even if they are not always sure what role their schools should play in such matters or how democratic values might be translated into action.

### Organization affects opportunities

Developing democratic values in children and young people is an educational task and the work of instilling such values presupposes that staff have the

requisite knowledge and skills as regards both theory and practice in this area. In general, staff would like to see more information and skills development. They would also like to have explicit, visible leadership that places democratic issues high on the agenda and supports the work being done by the staff in this field. An active, conscious form of leadership is an important prerequisite if work with democratic values is to be successful.

Staff give lack of time for dialogue with the children and young people in their charge as one reason why good social relations are sometimes hard to develop, another being the lack of time for staff discussions, reflection and mutual support. This problem is particularly evident in the higher grades of compulsory school and in upper secondary school. In the work with younger children, close relationships are able to develop between children and staff, which in itself provides opportunities for democratic dialogue. Staff feel that this gives them plenty of opportunity to work with the children's values and norms.

Teachers at upper secondary level feel that the way courses are structured has led to a greater emphasis on factual knowledge and anonymous interpersonal relationships, which restricts the staff's opportunities for focusing on democratic issues. Often, staff never get beyond intervening on an emergency basis or dealing with problems requiring immediate attention. This means they tend to focus on symptoms instead of underlying causes. The way time is used and activities are organized in childcare centres and schools affects their chances of achieving interaction and discussion and thereby affects the prerequisites for successful work with democratic values.

### What is the situation in childcare and at schools?

Even if the desired conditions are not always present, most pupils seem to possess democratic values. But these values are not always deeply rooted. Children and young people find it difficult to argue in defence of them and to stand up for them in actual situations. There is a considerable difference between learning about democracy at a theoretical, abstract level and embracing democratic values and thereby defending them under challenge. This also explains the occurrence of abusive behaviour. Bullying appears to be the most common reason why children and young people feel bad in schools. The occurrence of abusive behaviour says something not only about those involved but also about the prevailing social climate and about how relationships work in the institution concerned.

The democratic skills of pupils are being undermined by what are often undemocratic structures in schools, where the pupils frequently have no real

say in matters. Also, many children and young people, and indeed many staff, have little faith in established, formal democratic structures. A mutual feeling of powerlessness develops in schools where both staff and pupils feel locked in a process they are unable to influence. The various formal democratic constellations do not offer any genuine power. Instead, some pupils exercise influence by means of personal relationships with members of staff – other pupils succumb to disillusionment and resignation.

#### The policy application process and reality

The present report also contains an analysis of problems and opportunities in the policy application process as seen from a democracy-oriented viewpoint. Policy documents are being applied in such a way that democratic values in education are often overshadowed. The focus of the policy application system on subject knowledge, grades, quality screening for upper secondary admission, syllabi and tests, all affect school operations and their work with democratic values. This can also be observed in the follow-up and evaluation of educational activities, which tend to focus on things that are quantifiable in a 'straightforward' way, e.g. attainment levels, by using grades.

#### The need for a comprehensive view

This book concludes by looking at a number of areas of special interest at both national and local level worthy of consideration and reflection with an eye to future efforts to promote democratic values. These include such things as the way values held by adults affect work in this field and the consequences for this work of greater freedom of choice in education.





# Dialogue and relationships – the pillars on which democratic values rest

## Childcare and schools as meeting-places

This book will largely be about dialogue and relationships and a whole range of other important prerequisites for working with democratic values in Swedish childcare and schools. Childcare centres and schools are meeting-places for girls and boys, for different cultures and social groups, where children and young people are to be given the chance to develop into independent individuals who respect and show consideration for those whose views and ideas differ from their own. Childcare centres and schools are the only institutions where children and young people can mix freely regardless of their background, which gives us a unique opportunity – and also a duty – to develop their democratic skills.

Schools that deliberately focus on things like multiculturalism are concerned precisely with creating meeting-places for pupils as a means of developing greater understanding and respect for differing cultural forms of expression. When different outlooks are allowed to confront and be weighed against one another in an ongoing dialogue, and pupils absorb the importance of diversity at an early stage, children and young people are better able to understand the situations of others and put themselves in their place.

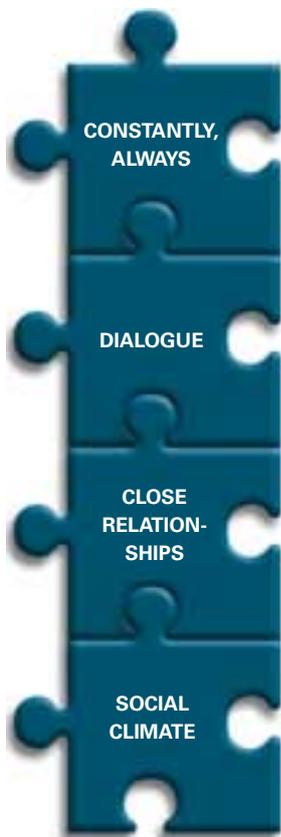
The task of childcare and schools is to develop the democratic skills of children and young people, which is a task with several aims:

- to conduct activities in a democratic way
- to help children and young people develop into democratic citizens
- to give children and young people an insight into the forms and substance of democracy.

The concept of democratic values in education is primarily about attitudes, communication and how people view one another. In the case of childcare and schools, democratic values find expression in the day-to-day working environment, both formal and informal, i.e. both in the classroom and during breaks, in corridor and canteen encounters, etc. Values and norma-

*None of us live alone.  
No-one can live isolated from  
other people. None of us start  
from a neutral position.  
Our relations with the past  
determine who we are.  
Relations both conscious and  
unconscious define the lives  
of each and every one of us.  
Ethics are about making us  
aware of all these relation-  
ships and ensuring that we  
do not live our lives as  
though we were separate  
entities, as though our  
actions did not affect others.*  
KG HAMMAR FROM  
'STÄNDIGT. ALLTID!'





tive behaviour develop in the interaction that takes place between individuals and groups, regardless of where we may be. Bullying and other types of harassment often occur in the informal environment. This is why we should not confine ourselves to the classroom situation but also focus on how interaction and encounter function in the informal structures.

Work on promoting democratic values is a continuous process for which all adults employed in childcare and schools share responsibility. The overall progress and direction of their work, and how the children and young people participate in it, represents democratic training in practice.

## Dialogue – a basic essential

The process of imparting democratic values is scarcely feasible without the presence of good social relations and opportunities for creating meeting-places for reflective dialogue. This applies both vertically and horizontally, i.e. both at and between all levels. Dialogue in this sense occurs when you have relationships that work. In such discussions, all opinions are voiced and the participants show due consideration for each other and for the opinions expressed. Democratic values are about both rights and obligations, e.g. the right of the individual to have a say but also the duty of the individual to listen to others. This also means not shirking conflict but seeing it as a way forward, perhaps essential to learning and development.

A good social climate is characterized by open channels of communication and opportunities for all to present their views and state their needs. All concerned are shown respect and both differences and opposing views are tolerated.

In the kind of dialogue where all are treated with respect, different points of view can be put forward. True dialogue is a democratic process whereby children and staff, for instance, speak and listen to one another, take in each other's points of view and try to arrive at a mutual understanding and a mutually acceptable solution by reasoned argument. This kind of dialogue helps both sides to develop an understanding of both their own and the other's viewpoint. The principal goal is not to reach a consensus but to demonstrate the reasoning behind various points of view so that those who take part in the discussion are able to understand what the others mean when they say something.

True dialogue presupposes that relationships and interaction are considered important and are approached with confidence by both adults and children. The way relationships work in an organization affects the social

climate and thereby the possibilities for interaction and discussion.

Modern research into democracy has developed an approach that places communication, democratic discussion, at the centre. The term 'deliberative dialogue' is used here to describe discussion in which the participants express and contemplate their own opinions and views and those of others.<sup>1</sup> In this field of research, deliberative dialogue is perceived as the essence of democracy. Working with this type of discussion satisfies the demand for a democratic approach in childcare and schools and is also a good way of developing democratic skills in children and young people.

Educational activity that allows for democratic discussion does not necessarily mean that all opinions and forms of expressions will be tolerated there. Basic values, democratic relationships and dialogue are also about drawing lines and showing consideration. Each individual must be able to take advantage of his or her freedoms and rights and must respect the fact that others who may hold completely different views are given the same opportunity.

The development of democratic skills presupposes both a *knowledge* of democracy and an *understanding of* and *familiarity with* democratic values. The democratic task of preschool centres and schools is based on an approach to knowledge that considers individual learning and development to be derived principally from interaction with others, in a social context that affects the prerequisites for learning. Instead of a technique whereby children and young people are perceived as passive recipients, this approach views learning as the outcome of mutual communication and interaction. In this sense, the effort to promote democratic values is a collective phenomenon that affects the entire educational undertaking. By focusing on relationships and discussion, the emphasis is less on each separate individual than on the individual in a particular context. The context is childcare centres and schools as social and cultural environments for learning and for the development of democratic values. It is a question of social relations and social climate both in the teaching situation and outside it, of how staff, management, governing bodies, children and parents communicate, and of the children's and young people's degree of participation and influence. An integrated view needs to be taken of their learning and development, and there must be an awareness of the fact that children who are happy and secure find it easier to learn.

Democracy is both form and content. A deliberative approach focusing on dialogue as described above is more concerned with the content and function of democracy than the more formalistic approach previously in favour which focused on democratic form, i.e. different kinds of decision-



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<sup>1</sup> From the Latin *deliberare* to consider well, from *librare* to weigh, from *libra* scales. (Collins English Dictionary 1991). See also Habermas (1988, 1995)

making that take the collective form of pupils' councils and class committees, etc, and the individual form of pupils with a range of compulsory school and upper secondary school options.

## What might the freedom to choose your own school entail?



The function of childcare centres and schools as free meeting-places for different cultures and social groups is challenged by the right of parents and pupils to choose from among both municipal and independent educational facilities. There is a tendency whereby certain independent schools with an explicit profile fail to provide the kind of meeting-place that allows different cultures and groups to come together. For some, the choice of school depends to a large extent on the values and norms applied there. Researchers have suggested that the role of schools as providers of democratic training has thus given way to a totally new situation in which different conditions apply.<sup>2</sup> If diversity is reduced, people's freedom to choose a school, which in itself might be viewed as a democratic right, could have an impact on the capacity of schools to discharge their democratic task.

However, many of the pupils and parents who choose an independent school feel that their cultural needs are not being met at municipal schools. The freedom of choice to which both parents and pupils are entitled threatens to compromise the ability of the educational system to promote democratic issues, although it is hard to predict what the consequences might be for the pupils from a democracy and integration viewpoint. If both pupils and teachers in a school are culturally or religiously homogeneous, for instance, this may impede the natural development of interaction with the surrounding community.

The National Agency for Education, however, has previously argued that fears that certain kinds of independent schools might enhance segregation are exaggerated.

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<sup>2</sup> Englund (1999)



# Striving for democracy – the policy documents



What are the official tasks of Sweden’s childcare centres and schools according to the national policy documents? The Swedish Education Act (1985:1100), Ch. 1 Section 2, states: *“Education is to provide pupils with knowledge and skills, and, working together with their homes, promote their harmonious development towards becoming responsible human beings and members of society.”* Thus education has a dual task embracing both the traditional knowledge mandate and the democratic ‘citizenship’ mandate. The Education Act also states that *“All activity in schools shall proceed in accordance with fundamental democratic values.”* Under the law, pupils are to be allowed to exercise influence over the structuring of their studies, to the extent and in the form warranted by their age and personal development.

All the national curricula begin by stating: *“Democracy forms the basis of the (national preschool/school) system”*. The concept of a common set of democratic values is expressed in identical ways in the various curricula, indicating that this issue is not confined to a particular educational level but is supposed to run through all preschool and school undertakings irrespective of the children’s and young people’s age, as part of a lifelong learning process. The curricula are thus linked together to create a whole and ensure continuity.



The 1994 Curriculum for the Compulsory School, the Preschool Class and the After-School Centre states that providing knowledge about fundamental democratic values is not enough in itself. Schooling is to be provided in democratic forms and is to prepare the pupils for the task of taking personal responsibility. This includes organizing educational activities in accordance with democratic principles. Such work forms are essential if schools are to create the conditions for dialogue on values and norms.

The various curricula also focus on the communicative skills of children and young people. The compulsory school and childcare curriculum, for instance, stresses the function of schools as social and cultural meeting-places: *“As well as being open to different ideas and encouraging their expression,*

*school should emphasize the importance of developing personal standpoints and provide pupils with opportunities for doing this.”*

The guidelines for teachers state that they are to “*clarify and discuss with the pupils the basic values of Swedish society and their consequences in terms of individual action*” and “*and openly present and discuss different values, opinions and problems.*”

The national curricula for the compulsory school (Lpo 94) and the non-compulsory school (Lpf 94) both affirm the following:

*“The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal worth of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall represent and impart.”*

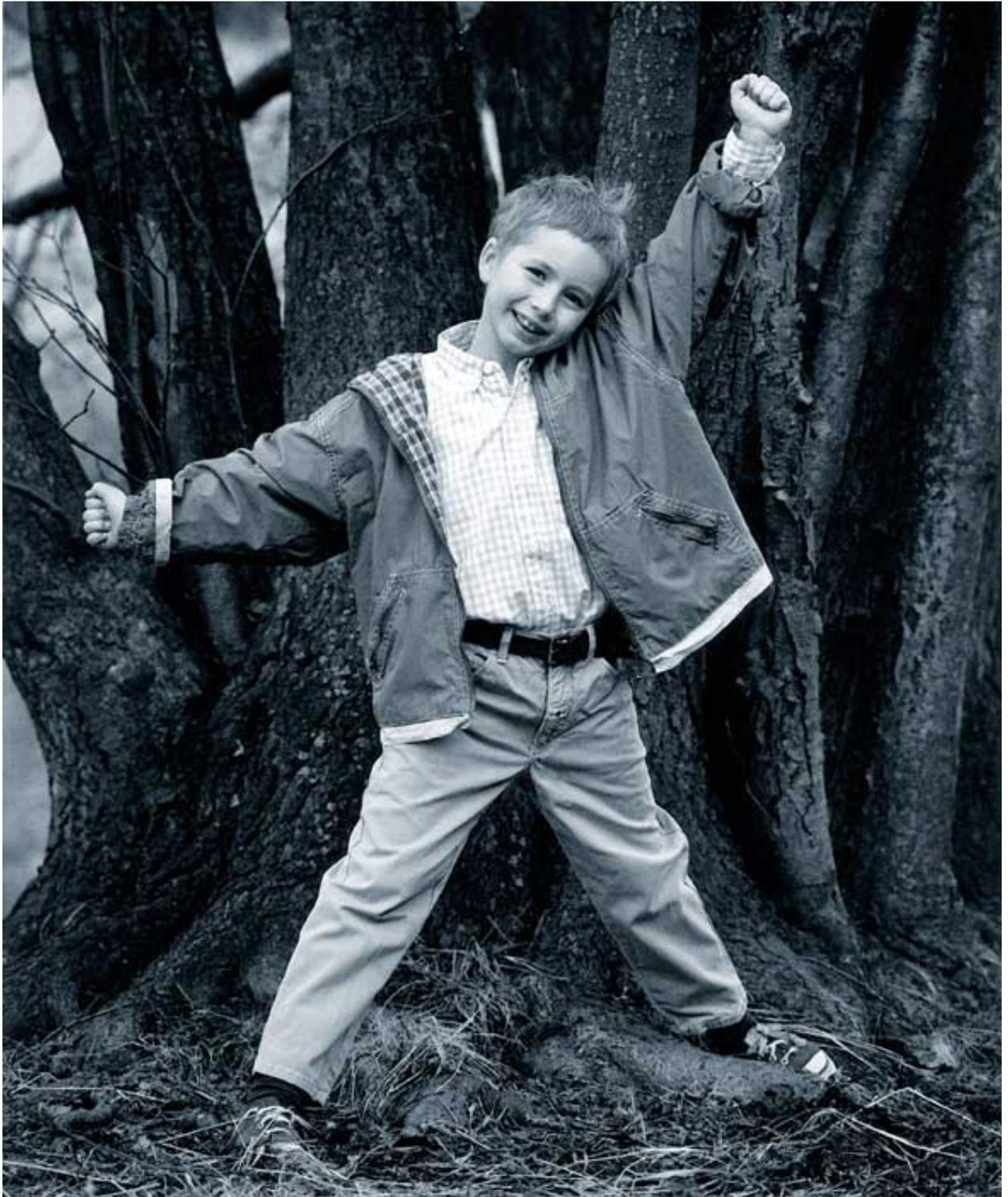
The general guidelines for recreational centres (1999:2) and family daycare homes (1999:3), based on the national curricula, state that an important task is to help inculcate into the children the democratic values on which Swedish society rests and encourage them to make them their own. Staff have a considerable responsibility for ensuring that the children learn to respect differing opinions and other differences, and are required to encourage the children to develop and test various ways of communicating.

School syllabi elaborate further on the basic democratic values discussed in the national curricula, to varying degrees. The connection between national curricula and subject syllabi has been made explicit so as to establish more concretely how each subject can contribute to the educational goals and the democratic values specified in the curriculum.

Syllabi contain a number of grading criteria. These are almost entirely knowledge and achievement oriented both at compulsory and upper secondary level. This means that pupils’ values are not to be taken into account in the grading process. A few of the criteria for Pass With Distinction and Pass With Honours relate to knowledge and achievements that are partially concerned with the concept of democratic values.

Over and above the national policy documents, there are a number of international agreements that Sweden is a party to and that thereby apply, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration of Human Rights.





# Democracy in practice in childcare and schools

To gain an idea of how childcare and schools in Sweden deal with the concept of democratic values, we need to consider to what extent each confronts the issues of social relations, interaction and dialogue. What are social relations like at any given school? Is there scope for democratic discussion? Are such discussions taking place? Are they used as a means of working with values and norms? Who is taking part in these discussions and who is not?

## The social climate

Childcare centres and schools as meeting-places are very important to children and young people. Whether they feel positive about the place depends on things like whether they feel contented in themselves and whether they feel able to influence things. Those children and young people who describe themselves as dissatisfied with school also claim to a greater degree than others that they are unable to influence what goes on there, while at the same time expressing their interest in doing so. A good social climate that results in contented children and young people also lowers the frequency of abusive treatment in the school. Many school bullies dislike school and are neither actively involved in their education nor motivated.<sup>3</sup>

Shortcomings in the social climate, anonymity, and a lack of influence or sense of meaning and affiliation all increase the risk of abusive behaviour. Bullying and similar phenomena appear to be more common in environments where hierarchical power structures prevail. There is much to suggest that bullying and other forms of abusive behaviour are the main reason why children feel bad at school. The number of pupils, parents and teachers who feel that bullying is a major problem increased in the 1990s. Teachers, too, feel exposed to it. Sexual harassment in such forms as the use of obscene language is another serious type of abuse. Pupils want teachers to tackle this problem at a deeper level by making clear what kind of values such language represents. In the long term, abusive behaviour must be viewed as a warning sign that not only says something about the children involved but also says

*Anyway, despite everything, I miss school after a few days if I'm at home sick. I miss the company/my friends, which I wouldn't have without school.*

PUPIL



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<sup>3</sup> Lindström (1997)



something about the atmosphere and social climate that exists in the school or preschool concerned. Improving the prospects for the development of good social relations is a way of counteracting abusive behaviour.

The success of childcare and schools in creating a climate of security and good social relations and enabling dialogue is only partially due to resources and the surrounding environment. There is much to suggest that the most important factor is the extent to which management and staff are able to cooperate and to conceive a vision and idea of how the school in question might develop and of how children, young people and parents might be actively involved and work together with the staff to create a good environment.

Most studies show that pupils on the whole are contented and enjoy school. The pupils appreciate their teachers. The majority of teachers also enjoy their work at school. Most teachers, pupils and parents feel that the school offers a secure environment and that parents are generally kept well informed about what goes on there. But there are also reports that the social climate in school is becoming harsher and has deteriorated. In the latest survey of people's attitudes in the school sector, teachers in particular paint a gloomy picture of developments; almost a third of them say they have observed an increase in abusive behaviour and almost half report growing problems related to a lack of ethics and morality. Parents also began to take a gloomier view of the social environment at school in the 1990s.

There are substantial differences in the work environment and social climate both between the various preschools, schools and local authority areas, within schools and between different types of school. On the whole, children and young people would like to have a closer relationship with their teachers in particular. There are a number of places, both large and small, where the atmosphere is secure and people work consciously and in the long term with democratic values and the social climate. But there are also places that have failed to achieve a social climate in which children and young people are seen and affirmed by the adults.

At preschool level and the lower levels of compulsory school, according to both children and staff, there is a good chance of developing personal ties between children and adults. Most teachers and staff working with younger children in fact see their fostering role as natural. Democratic values are a self-evident feature of everyday life. At this age, children and adults meet



daily and spend a lot of time together, which enables the adults to monitor and encourage the children's social development. As important relationships can develop here, a basis exists for further dialogue between children, young people and adults. It is also at this educational level that awareness of gender equality issues is most pronounced, e.g. concerning the needs of girls and boys and their status in the class. The older the children become, the less focus there is on gender equality in the classroom.

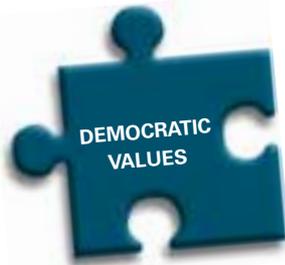
In the last few years of compulsory school and in upper secondary school, a dramatic change occurs. Teachers no longer have the time to develop personal relationships with their pupils, which increases the risk of any-

imity. Staff feel there is seldom time for discussing democratic values. Instead, the emphasis is on the acquisition of knowledge. The working day is often regarded as fragmentary and personal relationships between adults and pupils fail to develop.

### **Being democratic (content) ...**

Adults in the school sector express considerable willingness to work with democratic values but many say they do not know how to go about it. They seldom raise democracy issues and ethical questions, although the pupils want them to. Nevertheless, children and young people generally seem to embrace democratic values. This may be due to a number of different factors. Democratic skills, for instance, may have largely developed in informal learning environments and outside school, in the home and among friends.

But the pupils' values do not flow from a particularly deep understanding of the issues and they have difficulty giving concepts such as democracy and justice substance in such a way as to form the basis for action or the defence of a principle. The connections are not being made between the pupils' theoretical knowledge and their personal stances, nor is the knowledge they acquire being related to their own experiences. This may be one of the reasons for the occurrence of abusive behaviour. The lack of reflection means that pupils are easily swayed in their standpoints. Thus democracy is not taking root in the pupils but is being memorized as an abstract concept. As a result, many pupils show a limited capacity to seek and select a carefully considered position when faced with ethical choices, and to stand up for democratic principles in their thoughts and deeds. Many pupils do not perceive that they have a personal responsibility to help safeguard ethical principles but tend to lay the responsibility on others, such as the police and the judicial system. Pupils are beginning to 'privatize' moral issues, viewing the values they opt for as purely a matter of individual choice.



### **... and working democratically (form)**

Most local authorities and schools equate democratic work with pupil participation, but views on what this participation involves and what is meant by the term vary from place to place. People are often referring to formal decision-making forums of one kind or another. The power to influence working methods is another definition that is sometimes heard.

Pupil participation has on the whole increased over the past decade. Yet half of the pupils in the higher grades of compulsory school and in upper secondary school say they are only able to influence their situations to a very

limited extent. At upper secondary level, the difficulties schools have in responding to the calls for greater influence frequently generate resignation among the pupils. Many pupils and teachers are frustrated at not being able to exert real influence. The majority of pupils would like to have a greater say in the way their school is run, i.e. with regard to study content, textbooks and teaching aids and especially to working methods and the general framework of rules, environment, resources and choice of teacher. A 1997 study showed, however, that the number of pupils who felt they were able to influence matters, in particular working methods and the content of their studies, was greater than in 1994.

Pupils cannot be expected to seek greater responsibility and influence if they feel that there is no prospect of their being given it or that it would not lead anywhere. Schools where the pupils study in groups and are organized in work teams with joint planning and innovative work forms and methods seem to find it easier to bring the pupils into the school process and give them influence and responsibility.

Most teachers in an evaluation were in favour of greater pupil participation and the opportunities this presented for developing active and committed citizens. But the favourable attitude of teachers to greater pupil participation lessens the older the pupils become.

Many pupils exhibit a distrust of formal democracy in school. They often feel that the school takes no notice of the proposals submitted by pupil councils or committees, etc, due either to a lack of resources or to the children and young people simply not being taken seriously or not being given a mandate to express opinions or take decisions on important issues. The pupils' distrust of formal democracy in school also affects the attitudes taken to formal democracy in society. If democracy is only perceived as form and not content, people's faith in democracy as a fundamental value is undermined.

There are a large number of pupils who feel they have considerable opportunity to influence the content of courses specific to a study programme. Few pupils, however, feel able to influence the content of core subjects. And it is the teachers of theoretical subjects who are most against giving pupils more influence over their study situations and study content. The degree of opposition varies considerably, however, from course to course and from teacher to teacher. Evaluation of the national upper secondary programmes also shows that there are clear differences between the various programmes. Pupils in a few of the national upper secondary programmes

*Many teachers find pupil participation tremendously provoking and fight it very effectively, and imperceptibly, by simply not taking part.*

TEACHER

*Things have got to such a point that pupils run around the school offices complaining about the way teachers teach or behave and this is then treated with the utmost seriousness. Sometimes you have to draw a line regarding how far this sort of thing is allowed to develop as they are not really ready for it. I usually tell my pupils that if there is something they are not happy about they are to talk to me and no-one else and then we can discuss it.*

TEACHER

feel they are able to exercise considerable influence over the way the work is organized. It is the teachers in programmes preparatory to further studies who are most sceptical of the pupils' capacity to shoulder the responsibility that greater participation demands. And it is in these programmes that pupils are to be found who prefer their studies to be ruled by teachers, timetables and books.

## The correlation between teachers' and pupils' opportunities for exerting influence

With respect to the work situation for teaching staff in Sweden, attitude surveys conducted by the National Agency for Education show that teachers feel they are well able to influence classroom work. Almost all the teachers felt they exerted considerable influence on the substance of their teaching, e.g. working methods, study content, textbooks and teaching aids, and only a few expressed a wish for a greater degree of influence. Many teachers, however, feel powerless to influence preconditions for school work such as resources, the school environment and group size. Thus lack of influence and participation applies not only to pupils but also, in part, to teachers.

There is a connection between the extent to which pupils and teachers respectively are able to influence school affairs. In schools where it is difficult to recruit pupils to pupil councils and work groups, staff are often reluctant to participate in various types of development or working groups as well. As the framework is decided by others, staff feel the demands being made upon them are too heavy at a time when resources are dwindling and classes are growing in size.

While responsibility for things like the interpretation and integration of democratic values in the teaching process is largely delegated to individual subject teachers, these teachers are not always given the means and scope to perform the task properly.

Teachers also have little confidence in either the school management or the municipal governance of the school. In the latest attitude surveys, a clear majority of teachers felt that the local authority had failed to take proper responsibility for school activities. This is of course a very serious matter and may be due to a number of factors, such as deficiencies in local school plans, dissatisfaction with budget cuts or a perceived lack of competence in political representatives responsible for education.

It is imperative for school staff to form an integral part of a democratic organization. Otherwise they in their turn will find it difficult to relate





properly to their pupils and to the issue of pupil participation. If staff are not given a greater say in their work situation, there is a danger that their faith and trust in democratic structures will be eroded, a development that might easily infect pupil attitudes.



# Ways of viewing the democratic mandate

The aim in the following section is to identify both the opportunities and problems involved with a view to identifying the preconditions for successful work in the field of democratic values. The preconditions tend to interweave so as create a whole. One important issue is how we perceive the task before us – and how we translate our attitudes into action.

## Dialogue and relationships are the key

One common denominator among childcare centres and schools that have managed to work successfully with democratic values is their ability to create the right conditions for face-to-face dialogue. Ongoing discussion and reflection are indispensable instruments in the process of getting both knowledge and felt values to take root among children, young people and adults alike. Moreover, teaching environments and working methods that offer scope for dialogue are largely in line with the official requirement that educational activities must be conducted in a democratic way.

Childcare centres and schools that create an atmosphere in which people are able to freely express thoughts and feelings play an important part in developing the ability of children and young people to reflect on matters relating to democratic values and thereby to broaden their horizons. Indeed, many of these institutions use dialogue as a means for finding new ways of solving conflicts and combating violence.

Dialogue is time-consuming. There is much to suggest, however, that improving communication is one of the best ways of furthering work with democratic values. A number of studies show that children and young people develop their ethical attitudes through interaction with other children and with adults. This development begins early on when the child is still very young.<sup>4</sup> Research also shows that communication is an important part of the learning process. Childcare centres and schools should offer scope for interpersonal encounter if they wish to succeed. Education must be grounded in meaningful relationships. There must also be mutual respect and trust.<sup>5</sup>

*Teachers could make a lot of subjects much more fun if only they could get their pupils to be as active as they themselves are.*

PUPIL

*Values and attitudes are the main thing in school, really. In my experience, if these work, the learning process goes more smoothly. If pupils are worried about who is going to be nasty to them at break, the subject teaching becomes irrelevant.*

TEACHER



<sup>4</sup> Johansson (1999). See further Säljö (1996) for a discussion on the importance of dialogue for learning and development

<sup>5</sup> Grosin (1997)



*Teaching is relationship-oriented and is based on the mutual respect that can develop between teacher and pupils. This takes time and the peace and calm that makes such a meeting of minds possible. We have much to gain by creating the preconditions for pupils, parents and teachers to develop trust and respect for one another.*

TEACHER



<sup>6</sup> See for instance 'Hej skolminister' (2000)

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Folkhälsoinstitutet (1995, 1997)

Both teachers and headteachers often view the school's fundamental values as the basis for all learning.

The prospects for developing the democratic skills of children and young people through collective, communicative processes are affected by the increasingly individualized approach to teaching whereby each child is required to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Individualization may reduce opportunities for group interaction and discussion and thus for the development of a broader range of skills.

Lack of time for such encounters has meant that children and young people have fewer and fewer adults to talk to. Pupils want closer personal relationships with their teachers. They want teachers to pay them more attention, show that they care and give them affirmation.<sup>6</sup>

Pupils would like to see educational activities that combine learning with personal concern and in which staff respect and care about pupils and what they say and want. This link between care and education has been developed in the Swedish childcare system, and has led to a good deal of international recognition. The lack of a care perspective in schools is clearly related to the presence of various types of negative conduct, as has been confirmed by studies into abusive behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Discussions in schools dealing with important existential matters seem to work better in small groups where confidence and trust can develop and where each participant can be both seen and heard. Small groups also offer more scope for reflection.

## Drawing children and young people into the process

A democratic dialogue in which children and young people feel respected and taken seriously presupposes an ability on the part of the adults to see matters clearly from a non-adult viewpoint and to take into account the children's and young people's own questions, knowledge and experience. In many cases, efforts to promote and encourage democratic values tend to proceed from the adult point of view, which often impedes an open, democratic dialogue, not least because children and young people then easily lose interest and commitment and thus their willingness to discuss matters.

Pupils must be drawn in as active participants and their knowledge and experience must be made use of. If change is to succeed, the pupils must be brought into the process and perceive it to be meaningful.

More active pupil participation offers the greatest opportunities for progress in subjects like environmental studies. So far, however, the participation of pupils has been manifestly limited.

## Normal teaching activities offer little scope for discussion

The dual task of childcare and schools to promote both learning and democratic skills is as one and cannot be regarded as two separate processes that occur at different times and are the responsibility of different individuals. The two assignments are intimately linked and working with them involves parallel processes that are interdependent and constantly interacting. The traditional distinction made at both national and local level between imparting knowledge and teaching democracy obstructs the efforts under way to make democratic values the foundation and unifying element of all school activity.



*“Knowledge is power”*

In classroom situations, time is rarely devoted to discussion and dialogue between pupils and teachers on the subject of values and norms. Education is largely dominated by the imparting of facts – textbooks and other teaching aids still determine the teaching process to a great extent. In upper secondary evaluations, many teachers have stated that the structure of courses tends to lead to fragmentary thinking whereby the parts become more important than the whole – superficial learning is rewarded and the time needed for reflection and an understanding of contextual relevance is eliminated. Pupils state in attitude surveys that the teachers are incapable of listening to and taking note of the pupils’ own experiences and views. As a result, many pupils do not consider school to be meaningful.

Many teachers report that they find it difficult to strike a proper balance between lectures and free discussion. They want to lead the pupils along the ‘right’ path without forcing opinions on them. Teachers often say that they would like the pupils to arrive at the ‘right’ values on the basis of their own reflections. Discussing democracy and democratic values is difficult and

*Often, when I feel low and miserable, it’s because no-one seems to listen – as though no-one wants to listen to me although sometimes I really have something sensible to say!*

PUPIL



*Communicating means doing something together. What we communicate often has to do with our basic values and our view of people and with existential questions. That is when things start to happen, that is when we can work together and create quality education.*

HEADTEACHER



*There have been incidents of racism in the classroom, for example conflicts that flared up during the war in former Yugoslavia. We told them that politics don't belong in the classroom as we anyway haven't the time to sort out world politics within the subject syllabus.*

TEACHER

assumes a considerable degree of knowledge and skill on the part of the adult. Discussions must be such that all present are able to contribute different viewpoints, items of knowledge and questions.

Evaluation shows that pupils rate the various elements of their education according to the meaning and coherence they find in them. A school that bases its activities on democratic dialogue might lend meaning and a sense of community to the educational process by emphasizing the importance of each pupil being given the right and opportunity to communicate his or her views and feelings on matters relating to values and norms.

It is the responsibility of school heads and teachers to create the proper conditions for such discussions. Many teachers and headteachers want democratic issues to be given more space in subject teaching, and would also like to see issues considered sensitive and provocative to be introduced into classrooms where adults are present who can keep the discussion on an even keel on the basis of the school's democratic task.

If the adults fail to raise such issues, social and political conflict are effectively banned from the classroom and pushed aside into informal environments – where there are usually no adults to be found! As an adult working in childcare or a school, you can never evade responsibility for democratic issues and the right of the children and young people to discuss them, whether inside the classroom or outside. As an adult you can never evade responsibility for what transpires in the informal environments, e.g. the schoolyard and the corridors. Taking responsibility for the informal environments gives staff the chance to work with democratic values on the children's and young people's own terms. By taking advantage of the ample opportunities for development that are to be found in the social environment as a whole in childcare centres and schools, staff can make fuller use of the considerable democratic potential they in fact possess.

## Knowledge and values are interconnected

The best way of creating the conditions for a dialogue relating to values and norms in teaching situations is probably to integrate democratic values with the knowledge objectives of the subjects in the syllabus. Values are linked to knowledge and vice versa. The advantage of a multicultural teaching situation, for instance, is that different perspectives are represented in the classroom, which means the pupils encounter a multifaceted picture of reality. By allowing cultural differences and similarities to make themselves felt in the classroom, teachers can boost democratic skills. In its latest development plan for childcare, schools and adult education, the Government expresses a



desire to see fundamental democratic issues become integrated with knowledge objectives.<sup>8</sup> Just how this is to be achieved is a more difficult matter, however.

The responsibility for integrating knowledge objectives with democratic values is largely entrusted to the teaching staff. The newly revised compulsory school syllabi, however, represent an attempt to strengthen the links between syllabus and curriculum. Upper secondary schools, too, need stronger links. Under the present system, schools are finding it hard to integrate the different objectives and are experiencing policy conflicts of various kinds.

But expressing democratic values in concrete form in syllabi is a complicated process. Copying certain abstract concepts from the general curriculum is not enough. Instead of proceeding from each individual syllabus, which may make it difficult to gain an overall, coherent picture, the point of departure must be an analysis of the curriculum and the democratic value perspective. How might each subject be linked to such a perspective? The goals expressed in both curricula and syllabi offer considerable scope for local interpretation and action, which in turn require a higher level of knowledge and competence.

History and the other social science subjects have traditionally been accorded a great degree of responsibility for schools' work with democratic values. Social sciences and history teaching, however, both tend to take an approach consisting of an allegedly 'objective' mediation of facts about democracy. Textbooks tend to play an important role both for lesson content and for methods of work. There is a considerable risk that teachers work individually without any contact with their colleagues. Pupils for their part would like teachers to be more willing to raise difficult and controversial issues, ones that are closer and more emotionally relevant both historically and in the present. Teachers list the obstacles to such tuition as lack of time, short lessons and large classes.

And it is not of course acceptable for these subjects to shoulder the whole responsibility – all school activities and all the teachers are jointly responsible for promoting and encouraging democracy and basic values.

## Continuity and persistence are required

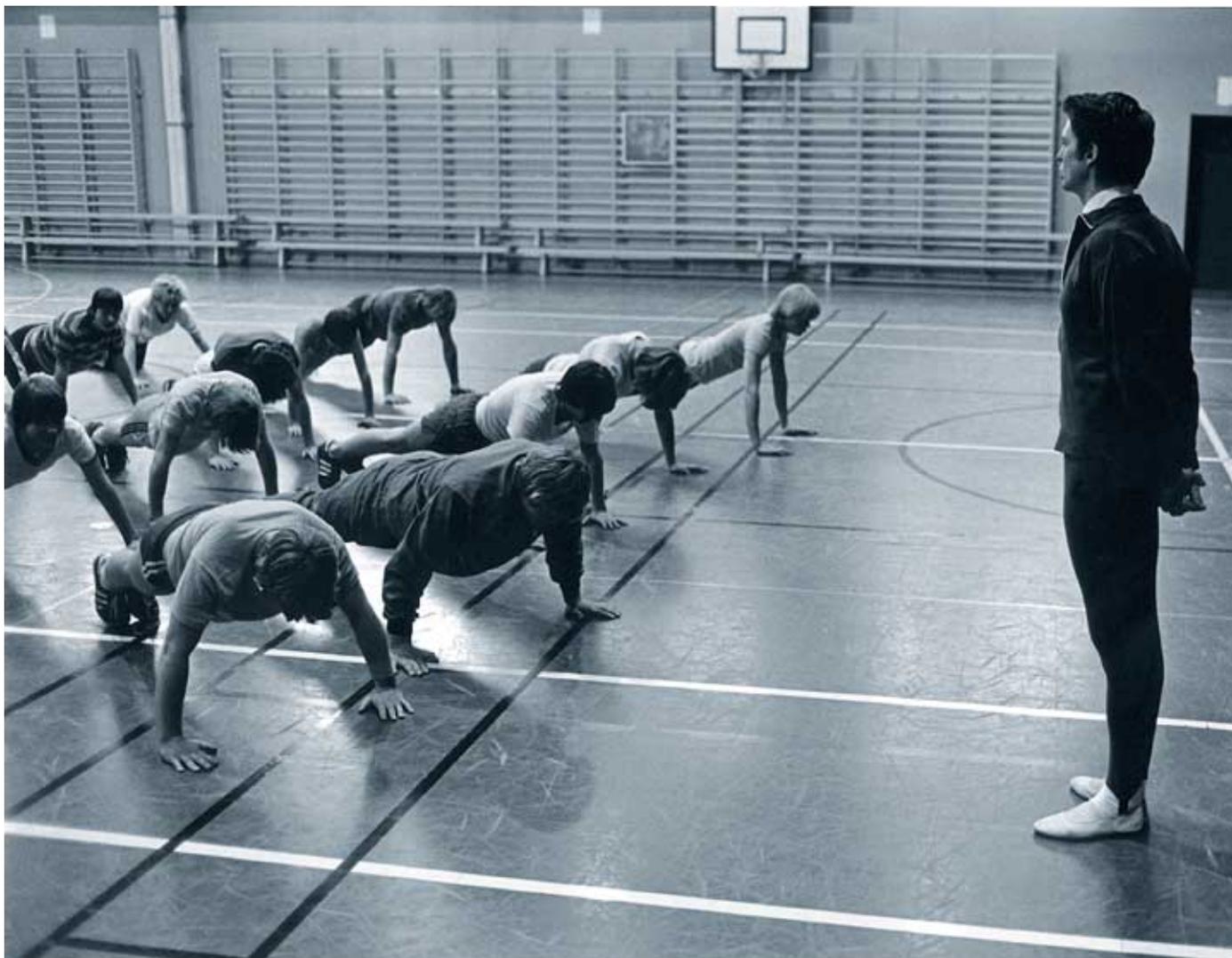
Working continuously and taking a long-term view are both important. Continuity can be interpreted in different ways. It may sometimes be seen as an obstacle, for instance when school structures are so weighed down by tradition that they are considered rigid and difficult to change. Continuity



*There is a constant process of change ... I see differences all the time in how I myself do things and how I see others doing them.*

TEACHER

<sup>8</sup> Government Utvecklingsplan för förskola, skola och vuxenutbildning (1999)



also has a positive side, however. Efforts to promote democratic values and thus counteract abusive behaviour must be long-term and wide-ranging.

New children and pupils are constantly arriving in the childcare and school system and new group processes ensue automatically. Social patterns change, which also affects the situation of the adults. This means that work on strengthening democratic values and counteracting violence and abuse can never cease or be considered at an end – it is an ongoing process.

The experience gained from successfully promoting democratic values, and in combating violations of them, shows that there are no ready-made



*It's not like a class project on Africa, exactly. It's something that begins, grows and progresses ... that's how you have to see it.*

TEACHER



models offering universal solutions. Schools that have made solid progress in their efforts to promote democratic values have integrated the issues in their daily work instead of separating them into parts, for instance by the use of theme days. The everyday working environment in school life provides ample opportunity for dealing with norms and values on the basis of actual events. Each school has its own unique situation and for this reason it is not possible to simply transfer a method from one school to another. The conditions prevailing in the area and school concerned must of course be taken into account in order to create the necessary local relevance and acceptance. The same applies to the efforts that must be made to counteract actions and views that violate the principle of democratic values. Schools must find local solutions to local problems.

A school's efforts in this respect often consist of emergency interventions, temporary campaigns and isolated measures focusing on a single issue. It is not uncommon for the democratic issue to be discussed only at separate theme days. Where this is the case, there is a danger that discussion will be confined to the issue of the day in current public debate. The work must be pursued continuously and in the long term, and there is a considerable need for integrated, long-term strategies.

One area for which long-term strategies are often lacking is gender equality. Awareness of the fact that boys, for example, tend to 'take up more space' than girls in the classroom and that gender-related abuse often occurs outside the classroom has not led to any discussion of what position or action is to be taken in strategic terms. Many schools seeking to promote multicultural perspectives make the same mistake in this area, too, often resulting in the occasional theme day or the like, particularly in schools with comparatively few pupils from immigrant backgrounds. Such schools generally find it difficult to introduce issues relating to cultural diversity and tolerance into their ongoing everyday work.

Selective measures may well serve a purpose by spotlighting a certain issue or remedying a particular problem, but they must be combined with other measures in both childcare and schools. Measures introduced to deal with isolated matters risk being less effective unless they are situated in a broader context.

Experience has shown that combating non-democratic views and actions through long-term effort tends to reinforce democratic structures and values in schools. Schools adopt a more proactive approach in seeking to strengthen the positive forces there, which can prevent problems from developing. A proactive approach also involves learning from a given solution to a

problem and letting the insights thus gained inform the work and the school as a whole so that the same problems do not crop up again. Through this kind of approach, problems and conflicts can lead to progress.<sup>9</sup>

## Collaboration with parents should be stepped up

Collaboration between childcare centres, schools and parents is essential if all are to pull in the same direction and develop a democratic approach. Staff and management consider parental cooperation to be of the greatest importance for the success of the school's work in promoting democratic values. Vital in this respect are the parents' own values and the way they feel about the school's fostering role.

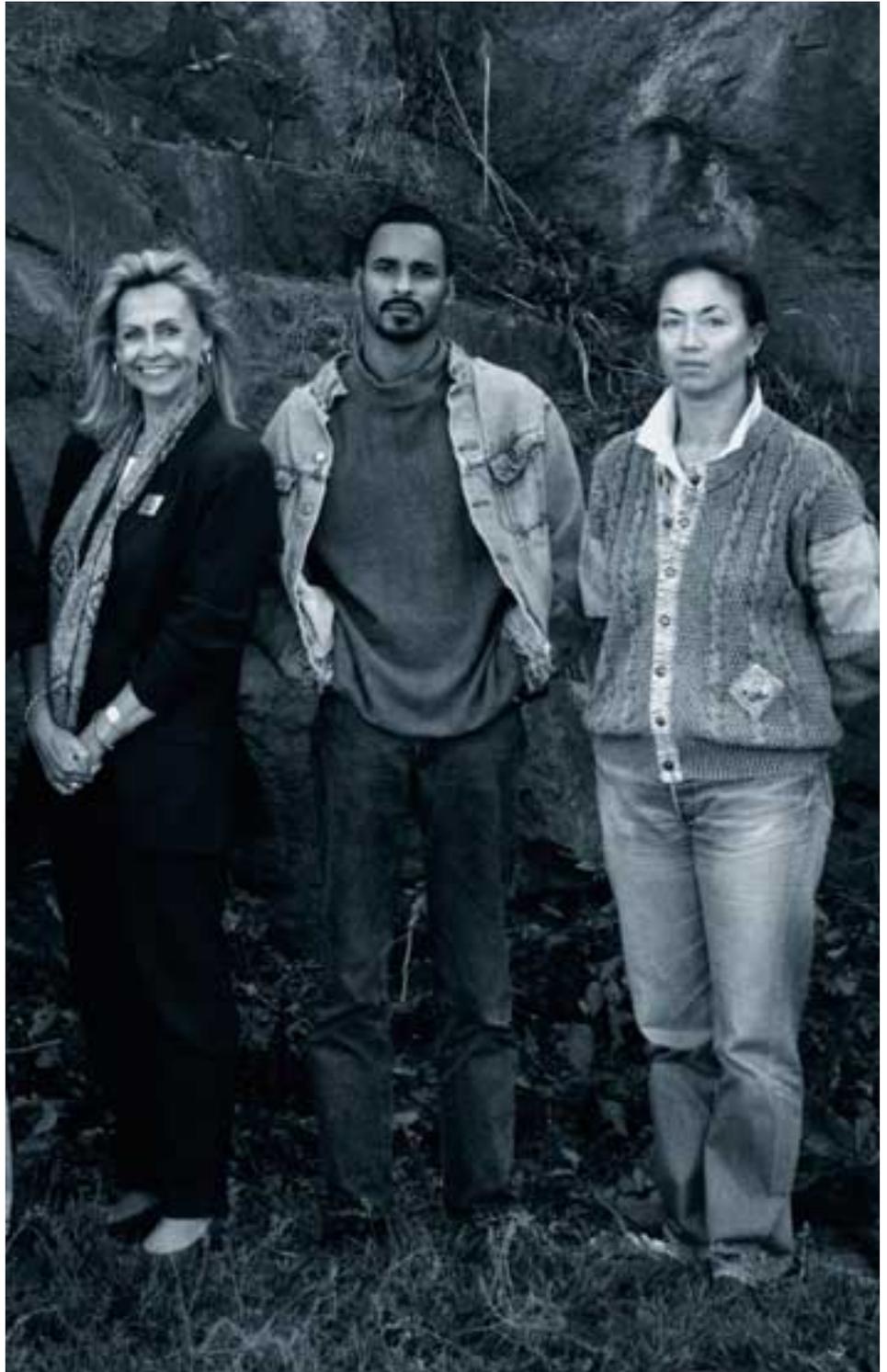
On the whole, Swedish schools have hitherto found it relatively difficult to bring parents into a constructive discussion on children's learning and upbringing. Parents in general feel they have very little say in what goes on in school, and only half of them have tried to change something there. As a result of poor communication between school and home, conflicts often arise as to who is responsible for the child's upbringing. In childcare, the situation is different and contact between staff and parents is frequent and spontaneous.

Some teachers feel that certain parents place too much responsibility for a child's upbringing on the school. They feel that parents have an exaggerated belief in the teachers' capacity to cope with matters that the parents themselves are unable to cope with. Most teachers and headteachers feel that the responsibility must be shared and that it is the parents who are principally responsible for a child's upbringing. Some parents feel that schools are interfering too much in matters that properly belong to the private sphere. Many schools have found that both increased communication with parents and more explicit objectives are needed. Staff must communicate with parents to try and clarify who is responsible for what. Parents must be informed about what the school is doing and be invited to have a say in their children's schooling. This highlights yet again the need for explicit, broadly-endorsed policy documents to which parents have access.



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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the proactive approach, see 'Är Pippi Långstrump en hälsoupplysare eller en hälsorisk?' (1998), etc.



# Organization affects opportunities

Organizational choices and opportunities in childcare and schools naturally affect the work done there to promote democratic values. How do the adults communicate and on what basic premises? What do the work methods look like, how is time used, how important is the management role, how are relations with the school's governing body, what knowledge and skills exist and are needed, etc?

## Adults also need dialogue

Staff need to be given the opportunity to talk to one another about relationships and democratic values and the role to be played by childcare and schools. There is a great need for reflection on these matters. Staff should proceed in their actions from a common set of values. The adults in school need to discuss their various views and interpretations and weigh them against one another in order to develop a democratic ethical approach. They need to discuss both what democratic values actually represent and how the concept can be interpreted – as well as how such values are to be consolidated in practical day-to-day work, i.e. what educational approach democratic values implies. In the view of staff, the adults involved must be agreed on these matters if efforts to promote democratic values among the children are to be credible and to succeed.

Seeing adults as role models is one of the cornerstones of the teacher's fostering activity, which means that their actions contribute to the understanding that children and young people acquire of the concepts of democracy, tolerance and respect. Staff often emphasize that showing inconsistency in one's dealings with children leads to ambivalence, a lack of norms and trouble.

Many teachers, especially at upper secondary level, feel that their work burden has increased to such an extent that they seldom have time to meet for lengthy discussions and thus have had to try and discuss the democratic issue outside the timetable, in informal, day-to-day conversation. These



conversations usually take place within the work unit organization or subject groups or during coffee or lunch breaks. Such contacts are considered more beneficial than formal meetings or in-service training sessions for developing personal relations and thereby confidence and trust in one another. Informal conversations, however, often have a failing, namely the fact that information exchanged in this way tends to remain in smaller groups. Communication between different hierarchical levels in schools is also relatively poor as regards discussion of democratic values.



*One teacher, one class has long been the rule. If you couldn't handle the responsibility it was your own fault. But it wasn't something you admitted openly. For many, letting colleagues attend their lessons has proved difficult – getting feedback on how you function as a teacher. There are a lot of teachers who daren't take this step – the closed classroom teachers... we're not used to sharing our troubles.*

TEACHER

## Different work forms as extra support

A trend is currently under way whereby different ways of organizing school activities are being tested for the purpose of establishing closer contact with the children and among the adults. One way of supporting the teachers in their educational task is to provide them with personal supervision. Another current development trend is the organization of staff into work teams around a group of pupils. In some schools, this is referred to as a work unit. The activities of work teams are aimed at improving collaboration between different areas of competence and at the same time providing support for the individual teacher. As it is difficult for individual teachers to take decisions about values and norms on their own, the support of colleagues is very important.

At some places, the whole school is organized into work teams, while in others only certain teachers are involved. The composition of work teams varies over a cross-section of subjects, age groups and non-teaching staff. At some schools, work teams have extensive responsibilities both educationally and financially, while others, especially the larger ones, use work teams more as a forum for regular planning meetings. It is important for headteachers to create the conditions for smooth cooperation in these work teams and to clearly formulate the division of duties between the various vocational groups.

The way groups of children and pupils are organized, e.g. the size of groups, is also important. Smaller schools and classes with a higher teacher ratio give teachers the chance to work with the same pupils in more lessons over a longer period. The prospects for developing sound relations and a rewarding dialogue are therefore comparatively good at preschool centres and in the junior grades of compulsory schools.

Teachers in grades 1-7 at compulsory school feel they are considerably better placed to create the conditions for pupils to assimilate fundamental democratic values than teachers in grades 8-9 and at upper secondary school.

Teachers at lower levels, as well as childcare staff, take the children's own experiences as their starting-point and discussions occur in both formal and informal environments and encounters.

At upper secondary level, staff feel that the organizational set-up places major obstacles in the way of working for democratic values as the classes are not cohesive and pupils and teachers are unable to develop proper relationships. Time is divided into numerous different courses given by different teachers. Collaboration and cooperation between the various subjects seems to be difficult to achieve in many cases. The subjects specific to a programme are often gathered in a single block and the core subjects inserted between them. This means that core subject teachers are often involved in several different programmes, which makes collaboration between the various programmes more difficult. Several teachers say that the structure of courses means that they are unable to establish any kind of close relationship with individual pupils or keep track of how pupils are progressing in their studies.

As a result of schools becoming more knowledge-oriented, fragmented and anonymous the older a pupil becomes, the issue of democratic values is increasingly restricted to an organized teaching situation. Responsibility for imparting democratic values is increasingly delegated to the teachers of subjects that have traditionally been required to address the democratic issue in school. The pattern that develops during a pupil's final years at compulsory school is repeated and reinforced at upper secondary level.

## Ways of viewing leadership

Good relations and a climate conducive to dialogue have a chance to develop at childcare centres and schools where those in charge have formulated a vision for the work being undertaken and managed to instil enthusiasm in the staff and enlist their support for this democratic vision. A characteristic of schools that have succeeded in creating an atmosphere of openness, participation and collaboration – where the goals of democracy and shared basic values are living components of the education provided and where the emphasis is on non-stop learning – is visible, explicit leadership. Those responsible for educational activities must take specific responsibility for creating the right conditions for dialogue between staff so that the school is able to develop a democratic approach.

Promoting democratic values is an educational issue requiring educational leadership. To achieve this in a real sense, school leaders must take part and set an example themselves in the educational process at the school, share their knowledge, collaborate with their fellow staff, follow up, provide rapid

*The advantage of working in a small school is that you can learn everyone's name. If you meet someone in the corridor, you know exactly who it is. With the help of the parents, you develop an overall picture of the child and the child's situation.*

TEACHER





feedback, be explicit and make demands of and express their expectations regarding their staff.

Another important prerequisite for school leaders' ability to perform their managerial duties is the existence of a proper working relationship with the local authority. The National Agency for Education's 1998 quality supervision report showed that local authorities on the whole are not explicit as regards objectives and frameworks – but often interfere in and decide the details of work in schools, thus restricting the scope for school leaders to assume responsibility for this level. This practice also adds to the administrative burden and thereby reduces the time available for the school leader's managerial task. Studies show that school leaders have little real opportunity to exercise their educational leadership as they have difficulty maintaining proper relations with their staff.

On the whole, conscious, visible and explicit leadership is lacking in childcare and schools and among governing bodies. There is insufficient awareness of the policy application process, i.e. the process of goal definition, implementation, follow-up and evaluation and improvement, and of the importance of working systematically. Many school leaders are not provided with the means to live up to the schools' democratic mandate as the local authority has other priorities. If school leaders are to be given a genuine chance to promote democratic values, one of the prime prerequisites is the support and encouragement of political representatives and municipal heads of department.

Financial policy instruments also play a part. The goals drawn up in school plans are not always funding-related so that school leaders are given a reasonable chance of implementing them. This applies for instance to funding for higher staff ratios, both inside and outside the classroom, and for further in-service training for staff working with democratic values, evaluation and follow-up.

Despite what are frequently difficult conditions, the great majority of school leaders are highly committed to their task. They are actively involved in developing the school and have numerous ideas and thoughts about what they wish to achieve. Most school leaders have a high level of ambition as regards ensuring both the contentment of pupils and staff and a good social climate. Only a few of them, however, have presented this vision to their staff.

Many teachers regard democratic issues as very important and would like to work with them on an active basis, but feel they are not receiving adequate support from the school leaders. They feel they are not being 'seen' and are not receiving proper feedback on the work they are doing. This affects the social climate at the school.

School leaders have an important duty to make it clear that all staff are responsible for working with democratic values and for explaining how such efforts are to be pursued. Greater delegation of duties entails those entrusted with a task being given both the requisite authority and the means for shouldering the responsibilities involved. Clear, working channels of communication become essential for proper follow-up and evaluation.



## Considerable need for greater competence

Measures must be taken to satisfy the needs of various staff categories for both knowledge and professional competence. But it is vital in this context to proceed from the needs of the school operation as a whole, not just those of individual staff, for the kinds of skills that will facilitate work with democratic values.

In a number of evaluations, teachers have expressed considerable uncertainty and lack of experience on the question of how to handle democratic issues in purely practical terms. Democratic values presuppose a responsible adult knowledge of group dynamics.

In the National Agency for Education's latest attitude survey, almost half of all teachers felt they had an inadequate grasp of how to work socially with pupils. In the same survey, only a quarter of the teachers felt they knew enough about how different cultures can be integrated in the educational system. The Agency's three supervisory reports from 1999/2000 show that there is a substantial need for in-service training in all areas under review.

Often, it is precisely when democratic values are to be translated into practical action that the work falls down. This may be because people have not discussed carefully enough what the consequences may be for school work of applying democratic values, or which strategy should be applied in order to put them into practice. Many teachers blame this on a lack of competence and a lack of support for the work being done.

Working with democratic issues presupposes an awareness and understanding of what the various concepts relating to fundamental democratic values actually imply. The work demands educational skills relating to how democratic values may be translated into action using various methods and approaches.

*I would dearly like to prise open the carefully-sealed box labelled 'the school's fundamental democratic values'. The label itself, which is often used as a reference, relieves us of the necessity to check the contents and to work on developing our thinking and our understanding. Similarly, we should thaw out our deep-frozen educational ideologies and consider them in the light of our practical activities, begin openly discussing what the time-hallowed and undisputed values of our schools might lead to.*

TEACHER





In-service training is important if the democratic issue is to be the responsibility of all staff, not least in the light of the fact that efforts in respect of various democracy-related issues still tend to be too dependent on the enthusiasm of individual staff members. The responsibility for ensuring that democratic values are generally accepted and translated into action cannot be borne by a few individuals. The democratic mandate is the responsibility of all adults.



## How is time used?

Time is described by many as the commodity in shortest supply in Swedish childcare centres and schools today and is considered a problem at all levels. For various reasons, children and young people are not being given the opportunity to discuss values and norms to the extent they themselves would wish. Nor are teachers finding enough time for reflection and educational dialogue among themselves on the subject of democratic values. This means that both childcare and schools are having considerable difficulty discharging the democratic task entrusted to them. It should, however, be noted that in reality there is plenty of time and opportunity for children, young people and adults to get together. Pupils are in school virtually all day – as are preschool children – for a considerable number of years. Therefore it is perhaps not so much a question of time being in short supply as of what it is being used for.

*As you are always so pressed for time, you never dare initiate a dialogue as this would mean taking up your own time and others' time – time that you know isn't there for the taking.*

TEACHER



Opportunities for discussion between children, young people and adults are greatest where the teacher ratio is high. The number of children per adult naturally has a bearing on the extent to which a member of staff can devote time to individual children. As a result of the budget cuts that many childcare centres and schools experienced in the 1990s, the number of staff has declined and many adults with other skills than teaching have disappeared. To compensate, many schools have sought to find new ways of developing social relations between children, young people and adults. Many schools have introduced host and mentor systems, others use a system of 'fellow-pupil helpers'. By introducing resources of this kind, schools can get adults with other skills than trained teachers to support their efforts to promote democratic values.

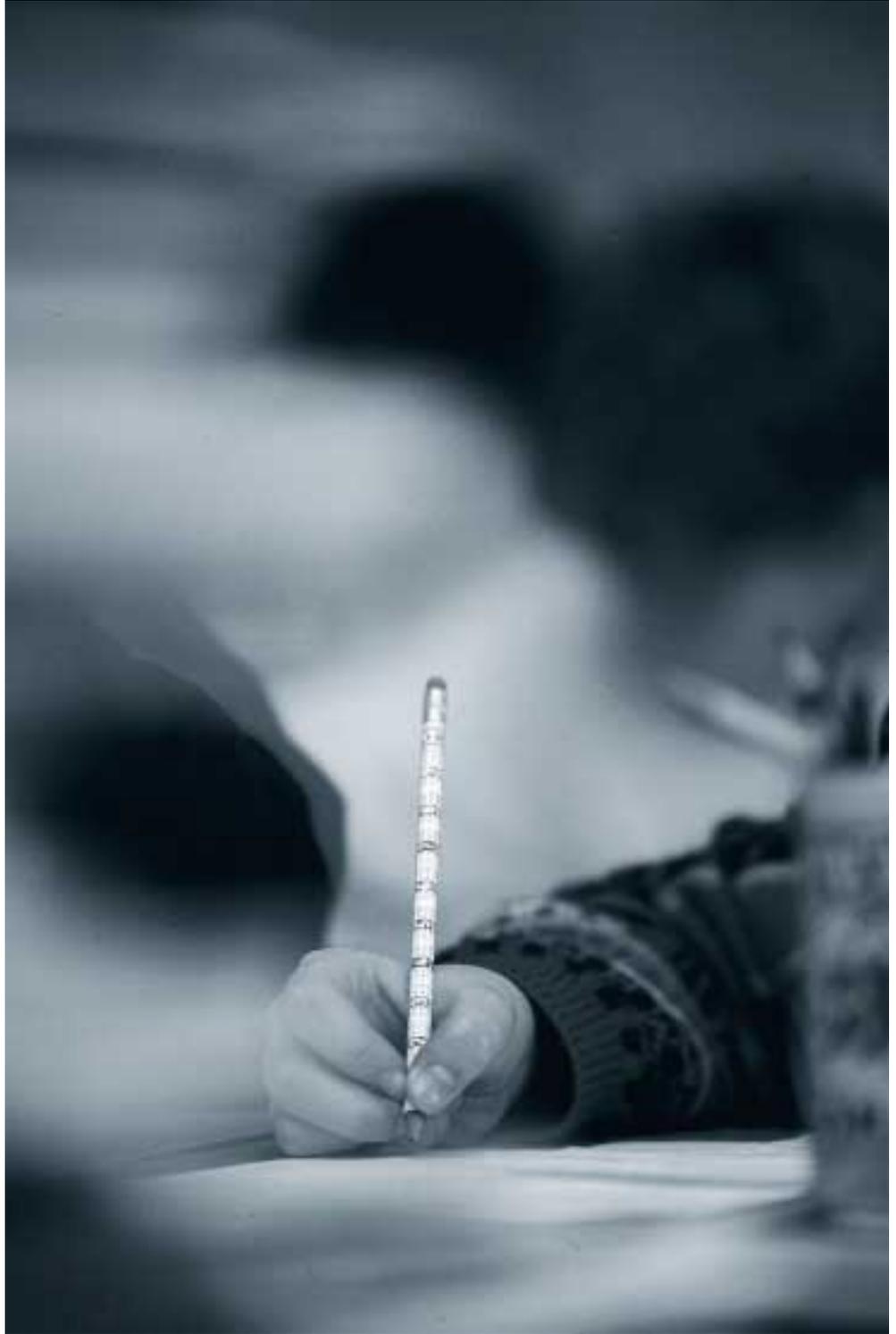
## The working environment – material requirements

If people are happy at school, this is due to both the social and the physical environment. The physical environment – how the premises are laid out and designed – affects how successful both childcare and schools are in their

work with democratic values. The working environment affects both children and young people and their contacts with one another and with adults, as well as the adults' scope for collaboration and communication. In some schools, teachers find it difficult to meet because of the way the premises are designed.

For staff to work along the lines that the national curricula seek to encourage, school premises are needed that allow for flexibility and for work with groups of varying sizes. Most schools in Sweden were built in the 1960s and 1970s or earlier and are seldom suited to modern requirements. In many schools, the need for improvements is substantial: the premises are not suited to their purpose and the environment may be summarized as bleak. Deficient premises can hardly be described as the main reason for the failure of schools to work adequately with democratic issues, but the material environment can have the effect of either stimulating or hampering efforts to promote democracy. The school environment sends certain messages regarding the value society attaches to the children, young people and adults who spend their time there.





# The policy application process and reality

What opportunities are actually afforded by the policy application system? Does it stimulate or hamper schools in their work with democratic issues? Many schools report that they are experiencing conflicts at system level – the way policy documents relate to one another is either unclear or contradictory, e.g. the relationship of curricula to syllabi and grading criteria. There may also be conflicts between different staff at a particular childcare centre or school due to differences of opinion on how the mandate is to be interpreted or how efforts to promote democratic values should be pursued.

## Syllabi and grading criteria rule at the expense of the national curricula

The concept of democratic values in Sweden's national curricula is expressed in a relatively abstract, generalized way. Consequently, schools often feel that there are shortcomings in both governance and guidance in this area. Teachers and other staff tend to view the generalizing formulations of the democratic code in the curricula as failing to provide them with the support they need.

To a great extent, school activities are governed by syllabi and grading criteria. This is particularly true of upper secondary schools, where many teachers plan and instruct on the basis of syllabi, focusing on achievement levels and grading criteria. Programme evaluation studies show that teachers have either not received or not sought explanations for the recent upper secondary reform or for the wording of educational policy documents. Consequently, they have been unable to work on 'translating' national policy documents for local use in the way intended. In upper secondary schools, local work on the national curricula has often had to take second place to the work on developing local grading criteria.

In the recently revised syllabi for compulsory schools, the links to the national curricula have been strengthened, particularly in the case of certain specific subjects. But the grading criteria largely lack any direct link with the

*The first thing I think about when I need to feel clever and pleased with myself (or when feeling sad and miserable) is almost always school, grades and tests. It's school with all the ordeals and 'grading' you're exposed to there that is the source of most of my 'God-I'm-so-hopeless' or 'God-I'm-so-clever' feelings.*

PUPIL



goals to be striven for according to the curricula. Democratic issues, therefore, are not included. Thus the acquisition of values and of skills such as the ability to familiarize oneself closely with a subject, to understand it, to take an integrated view and to place it in its proper context are in danger of being overshadowed by the narrower elements present in the policy documents. This means that goals of a more collective orientation in the national curricula receive less attention.

## Tests and grades affect priorities

Written and oral tests are the methods primarily used by teachers to measure pupils' performance and provide a basis for assessing their grades. As democratic issues are not included in the grading criteria, the tests do not contain any questions about them. For the pupils, this emphasis on quantifiable knowledge clearly signals what is considered important to learn in school, and there is a danger that democratic issues are judged to be of secondary importance. Tests and grades affect the way pupils evaluate and rank subjects, programmes and types of knowledge.

The pupils also say that the present grade-oriented school system forces them to behave in an 'undemocratic' manner in order to do well. As they see it, to succeed you have to be self-seeking and look after your own interests. Under the circumstances, it is only logical and rational for the pupils to give precedence to graded learning material.

Many pupils apply tactical reasoning when choosing courses. Upper secondary pupils, especially those in the theoretical programmes, feel they are under pressure due to the high grades required for university entrance. The pupils do not primarily make their choices on the basis of their own interests or the need for in-depth study but give precedence to courses which hold out the prospect of high grades and thereby pay the greatest dividends in relation to the pupils' subsequent choice of a university education.

According to many teachers, the pupils' emphasis on obtaining good grades in their courses, combined with the pressure on the teachers to 'complete the course on time', has led to a grading system that does not facilitate work with democratic values but rather obstructs it. As the grading system is only knowledge-related in a narrower sense, it risks conserving an outlook that sees the main task of the school as imparting quantifiable knowledge. There is no system for rewarding efforts in the field of democratic values, apart from any remarks that may be added to school-leaving certificates recording participation in pupil councils or in committees with a pupil majority.

## What is to be assessed?

One fundamental problem is how democratic issues are to be assessed. Some teachers feel that although assessments are not supposed to take into consideration pupils' opinions and values, the grading system might make open, democratic discussions more difficult. There is a risk that pupils will not dare say what they really think and believe for fear that their views might have an adverse effect on their grades. The positions taken by teachers on whether and if so in what ways the values, attitudes and behaviour of pupils should affect or be weighed into their grades tend to vary considerably both within schools and between schools.

It should be emphasized that it is not the individual pupil that is to be graded on democratic issues – it is the school's activity as a whole in this sphere that is to be assessed. It is the activities of the childcare centres and schools that are to be pursued in accordance with democratic values and it is the childcare centres and the schools that are to guarantee that no-one is exposed to bullying or other forms of abuse. To determine how schools are performing in this respect, assessment instruments need to be developed able to measure pupils' knowledge in respect of democracy, their ability to identify ethical problems and explain them, and their ability to adopt and justify independent moral standpoints, as well as their participatory skills in democratic decision-making and their ability to communicate in a democratic way.

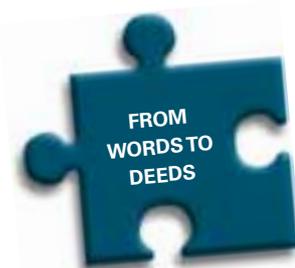
## Translating the democratic mandate into local terms

The responsibility for giving the goals substance and putting them into practice in school activities lies with the staff and the local authority, which means there is a good deal of scope for local interpretation. The lack of discussion on the subject of democratic values has resulted in widely differing interpretations, depending for instance on the way people view the task of the school and thus their own task.

In part, this difference of opinion on how democratic values are to be interpreted is one of the points of the exercise. It is natural and even desirable that democratic values are put into practice in different ways. There must be scope for local variations in the implementation process. But problems arise if the basic values that inform our democracy are too freely interpreted. The Swedish school system must be able to attain high uniform standards by means of the national general objectives concerning democratic values.

*Teachers are just people, I know, but they have tremendous power and a tremendous responsibility. They're not exactly the kind of people you like to get on the wrong side of... Teachers decide your grades, you can't get away from it. They hold the key to your future.*

PUPIL





*It's a never-ending thing, we're supposed to draw up plans for this, that and the other, and we pretend that they'll be followed up, but what actually develops you never find out. Endless time is spent by everyone on working out all kinds of plans to try and meet requirements whose implications you're not even sure about.*

TEACHER

In their efforts to lend substance to basic values, based on a democratic interpretation of the national curricula, some schools have initiated a process whereby such values are translated into assessable objectives. While some of these schools do so as part of a subject of their own creation, termed life skills or such like, others have sought different ways of ensuring that democratic values inform school activities.

Different kinds of rules, etc, often in the form of prohibitions, are viewed by many schools as practical application of democratic values. Efforts to promote democratic values thus risk being reduced to a set of rules and regulations forbidding non-democratic views and behaviour instead of strategies for how democratic values and norms are to be strengthened and promoted.

With the development of clear, concrete goals and strategies based on the curricula, pupils and parents are given greater insight into school activities. This allows them to make demands on the school and influence its workings. Conflicts often develop between home and school over democratic issues, e.g over measures to be taken against bullying. Such conflicts are often a result of a lack of communication resulting in parents being unfamiliar with the goals of the school. Parental endorsement of these goals is seldom sought.

What, then, do municipal school plans look like? All local authorities incorporate into these plans some form of wording about democracy and the goals defined for this sphere. But most school plans only contain objectives of a general nature expressed in vague, unspecific terms, such as requiring all those working in childcare and schools to strive for a democratic approach and democratic work forms and calling for participation and co-responsibility to inform all areas of activity. Only about a third of Sweden's local authorities have formulated democracy-oriented objectives in their school plans that might be described as assessable. The focus is mainly on democracy in its formal aspect, relating to pupil participation. Lack of clarity in democracy-related goals tends to engender lack of clarity in the local division of responsibility. Also, school plans have often been prepared without the endorsement of staff, pupils and parents having been sought.

Problems at school level, such as lack of time, competence, leadership and a professional language, combined with the poor quality of municipal school plans, have an impact on the schools' own work plans.

Problems in the policy application process, such as a perceived lack of harmony between different policy documents, rub off on school action plans for working with specific issues. These plans mainly describe measures to be taken against certain kinds of behaviour and actions, such as bullying, sexual harassment and racism.

Many teachers say they fail to see the benefits of producing plans all the time. Often, these plans are produced because someone else has decided they are needed, but the teachers themselves feel that the work involved mainly steals time and leads to rigidity.

School staff feel that there are so many plans for everything that there is a danger of their becoming disorientated. The division of responsibilities becomes fuzzy and the benefits of the plans are hard to detect. Plans that are not thought to fill a function stand considerably less chance of being implemented than those based on a clearly-defined need experienced by the staff themselves. Most teachers feel anyway that they are comparatively clear about what they wish to achieve in school.

In some connections, schools deliberately refrain from pursuing discussions about the direction of their activities for fear of generating conflict. A kind of 'harmony culture' prevails – conflicts are avoided by sidestepping controversial topics of debate, such as values. But adults must engage in discussions on such matters so that they are better able to discuss values and norms with children and young people.

*If the plan is just another piece of paper, we can manage without it. It's the preparation and experience that goes into it that is the important thing.*

TEACHER

*These are fundamental values I have held for many, many years now.*

TEACHER

## Shortcomings in evaluation

The difficulties that Swedish childcare, schools and local authorities have in formulating clear-cut goals concerning democratic values in education have impeded both follow-up and evaluation. According to staff, the greatest obstacle to the proper evaluation of work with democratic values in addition to the lack of clear, quantifiable goals, is the absence of close relations between pupils and teachers. Part of the problem is the difficulty of evaluating and following up efforts to promote democratic values. There is a lack of both serviceable instruments and methods in this area. It is much easier to quantify formal democracy, e.g. the presence of pupil councils or other formal democratic constellations, than to quantify what pupils learn about democratic values in the informal environments.

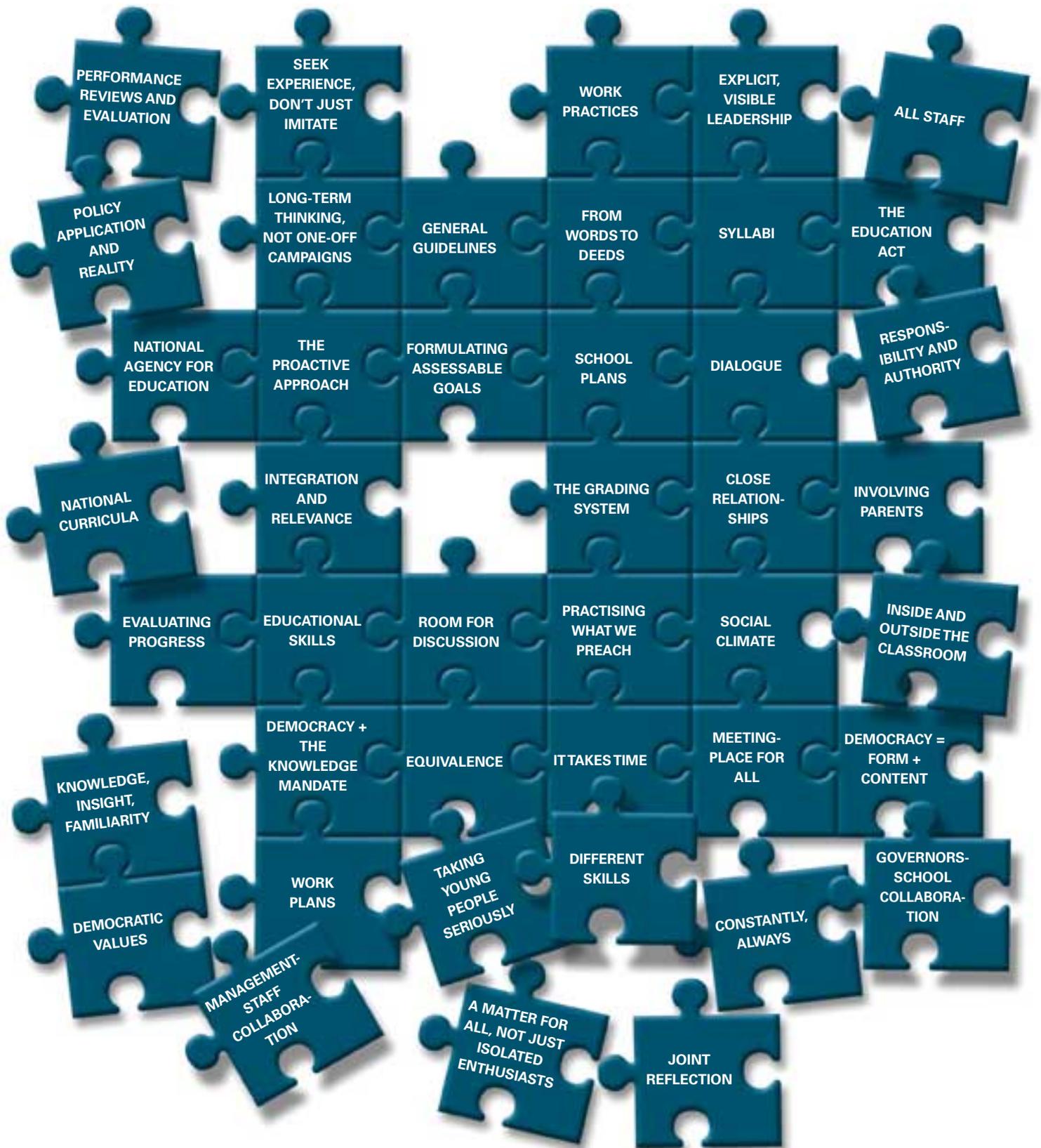
Many schools try to keep track of pupils' development to gain an idea of how the school is working in general. Interview studies show that both teachers and school leaders follow up and evaluate democratic issues via daily, informal observation of the pupils. Usually, it is a case of the teacher 'noticing' how the pupil's attitudes and values develop. Teachers form an opinion of pupils' attitudes by observing them, how they discuss with and behave towards one another in class, in the schoolyard, in the corridors and in the canteen.



Many teachers see the regular performance reviews attended by parents as an opportunity for following up and evaluating pupils' social development and attitudes. The way these talks are used, however, tends to vary considerably between schools and between teachers, depending in part on the individual teacher's view of which matters should be raised and in part on the parents' expectations and demands. Those teachers who feel their performance reviews work out well formulate personal, social goals and attainment objectives together with pupil and parents. This allows the teacher, the pupil and the parents to work towards the same goals.

Further, written tests and questionnaires are relatively common instruments for determining what values pupils hold. Such written 'assessments' allow the pupils to present their reasoning and arguments more extensively than in normal subject-related tests. In some cases, these tests/questionnaires are anonymous and are then more of a gauge of the group's or particular activity's progress. Many teachers feel that written questions sometimes work better than oral discussion as the pupils are not subject to group pressure and are thus able to be more open and independent. But questionnaires and the like say little about how the individuals will react in situations that put their values to the test. Nor does this kind of information-gathering provide any opportunity for discussions in which different points of view confront each other and develop in mutual interaction.





# The need for a comprehensive view – concluding reflections

If work with democratic values is to be firmly rooted in Swedish childcare and schools, many different prerequisites will need to interact. In the same way as the individual pieces of a puzzle belong together, the essential requirements for the task of promoting democratic values must be fitted together to form a strong whole. Chief among them is that everybody concerned views childcare centres and schools as a meeting-place providing opportunities for discussion and dialogue between children and young people. It is a question of interpersonal relations and how we treat, view and communicate with one another.

The task of instilling democratic values cannot be separated from everyday school work. It is an ongoing process permeating all areas of school life during a child's schooldays: in the classroom and not least during breaks in the informal environments of a school – where there are seldom any adults. And the players come and go, both children and adults, which means that the social meeting-places that childcare centres and schools constitute are in flux. New encounters occur all the time, groups form and others dissolve, and power structures change, are built up and pulled down.

How do we view the task in hand – does the old saying 'knowledge is power' still apply? How are children, young people and adults rewarded for working with democratic issues? How are the policy documents used? Is school leadership visible and unequivocal? Do we practise what we preach? Such questions are decidedly relevant and much remains to be discussed at various levels. To further stimulate efforts to instil democratic values, the following areas may be particularly worthy of consideration.

## How does greater freedom of choice affect democratic efforts in practice?

Choices made regarding and within schools are based on a range of factors. The public education system provides for individual choice of schools with different profiles, a choice of programmes and courses and of work options. Independent schools, too, are dissimilar in character and there are a growing number of schools in Sweden with ideological profiles. To an increasing

*You can never reduce work on democratic issues to a set plan that you follow slavishly or to a few lessons that you bash through mechanically with the kids and then it's done. Rather, it's a question of the sort of person I am and how I behave and whether I dare leap out into the unknown together with the children and help them translate all those virtues and values into real life experience whenever possible... It is through daily discussion and dialogue that democratic values are clarified and become explicit and it is there we must concentrate our efforts.*

PRESCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGIST

extent, too, parents are able to choose what kind of preschooling they want for their children. The fact that individual pupils have been given the opportunity to make choices of various kinds means that they are now able to exert a greater influence on their schooling. Studies show that programme choices are closely linked to factors such as gender and class. Ranking also occurs between upper secondary school programmes. This may give rise to differences in status within schools, where some pupils feel they are worth less than others. But what repercussions will the pupils' choices have later on for the development of their democratic skills, which to a great extent are dependent on a collective where different kinds of experience and background are represented? Paradoxically, the demand for greater freedom of choice, as a means of enabling pupils to influence their education more, which in itself might be regarded as a democratic issue, may impede efforts to promote democratic values in general. Segregated environments also stand in the way of encounters and dialogue between people with different kinds of experience and background. Greater freedom of choice places the role of schools in stimulating and developing the democratic skills of pupils in a new situation. Freedom of choice both in the public education system and as regards independent schooling is affecting the capacity of the schools to act in accordance with their democratic mandate.

#### Informal discussions/relations and the democratic work process

School staff report that their discussions on values, on relations with pupils and with one another and on norms and rules are usually of an informal nature. The drawback here is that management, and other staff, remain in the dark about the processes under way at the workplace in relation to democratic values. How is communication in the organization to be made explicit, put down firm roots and be encouraged?

As informal channels of communication become increasingly important for discussion and the exercise of influence, both for pupils and teachers, it is also worth considering whether the informal aspect of democracy is democratic. For informal environments and relations to make a valuable contribution, a communicative and relation-developing ability is required of those involved. Is this informal aspect of democracy compatible with democracy as a form of governance and decision-making, and what consequences might it have for those who are unable to exploit such channels?

## Do the adults themselves embrace democratic values in education?

Childcare and school staff are required to pass on and establish the basic democratic values of Swedish society. The wording of policy documents reflects an assumption that staff both formally and informally embrace the values expressed in the democratic code that is to apply in the educational system. The system presupposes that the adults are democratic and are to educate children and young people in the same spirit. Quite often, however, staff contend that they must first formulate these democratic values themselves before they can involve and encourage children and young people as well as their parents in the work. They would like to know what they are supposed to be representing in their encounters with others who it is assumed may sometimes represent other values. There is a clear danger of an 'us and them' perspective developing.

The fact that in practice democratic issues tend to have little impact on school activities may be partly due to the patterns found within the organization but may also be due to the staff's failure to implement democratic values. This raises certain questions, the complexity of which becomes apparent when the issue of democratic values is examined from both a formal and an informal perspective and from an individual and collective one. How can democratic values be introduced in a public context that constantly sends out messages of a non-democratic nature?

## Governance also affects priority choices

From a democratic viewpoint, the policy application process or 'chain of governance' presents problems. Policy documents are considered difficult to translate into local terms, link together and put into practice. In some cases, plans and local goals have a divisive effect rather than a cohesive, integrative one. Long-term, comprehensive strategies need to be developed at local level relating to the social climate at childcare centres and schools as a whole with a view to enhancing democratic values instead of 'getting stuck' with emergency, isolated measures.

Bearing in mind how the policy documents are used, the question also arises how efforts to promote democratic values in school might be accorded greater status and thereby correspondingly greater priority in school activities 'in competition' with the traditional attainment goals? This question appears to be particularly relevant in the final years of compulsory school and in upper secondary school where both teachers and pupils quite often 'drop' democratic issues. There is much to suggest that pupils' knowledge is not being properly developed and is failing to have an impact on their values,

*We are trying to find common norms at school but this is difficult as you have different types of teachers, profile subjects and core subjects, and we can never agree on what the norms should be. The question then arises: should this be done democratically via the teachers or should management decide? And should different schools have different norms or should all schools have the same norms?*

TEACHER

norms and actions. Time must be found for working with this issues both in the classroom and outside it, for children, young people and adults. Some schools are indeed finding the time, but many have failed to do anything about the lack of time available for discussions and reflection, a situation that they themselves have noted. We must consider how democratic goals should be formulated in the light of what we have learnt about how policy documents are interpreted and used locally.

### What do we mean by 'school results'?

Usually, when people discuss and assess school results they are referring to pupils' levels of achievement, in other words to the extent to which pupils have attained individual achievement targets. Expressing 'results' solely in terms of pupil performance in the acquisition of factual knowledge is a narrow approach that conserves a traditional outlook, as preschools and schools has an explicit democratic mandate. We need therefore to include democratic values in any discussion of school results. In assessing them, the emphasis should be on the school's performance in general and the extent to which the school is living up to the general curriculum objectives. So far, this form of assessment and scrutiny is comparatively rare in Sweden.

## The work of the National Agency for Education

The promotion of democratic values in Swedish education primarily occurs at local level. The task of the National Agency for Education is to actively support this development but also to provide the incentives required for it. Democratic issues will continue to be given high priority and the Agency will increasingly focus on providing the necessary prerequisites for the encouragement of reflection and dialogue.

In its work in this area, the National Agency for Education will be emphasizing the task of childcare centres and schools to support the development of democratic skills among children and young people. Democratic skills are dependent on communicative ability as it is largely through discussion and dialogue that people develop an understanding both of themselves and of others. Further, the Agency aims to spotlight in particular the link between learning, democratic skills and health. The various components interact and affect one another and therefore cannot be considered separately. Another democracy-related factor to which the National Agency for Education will be devoting particular attention in the future is the role played by informal educational environments in the development of democratic skills.





In response to a government commission, and in the light of the analysis contained in the present document, the National Agency for Education has produced a strategy for its work with the promotion of democratic values. The aim is to formulate and identify long-term points of departure and strategies for the Agency's efforts to support and encourage, assess and evaluate the work being done in local education in respect of democratic values.



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